1923

THE MYSTERY OF LOT 212 AND A TOUR DE FRANCE OBSESSION

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BLOOMSBURY SPORT
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY SPORT
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain 2023

This paperback edition published 2024

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data has been applied for

ISBN: PB: 978-1-3994-0158-6; eBook: 978-1-3994-0155-5; epdf: 978-1-3994-0153-1

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRo 4YY



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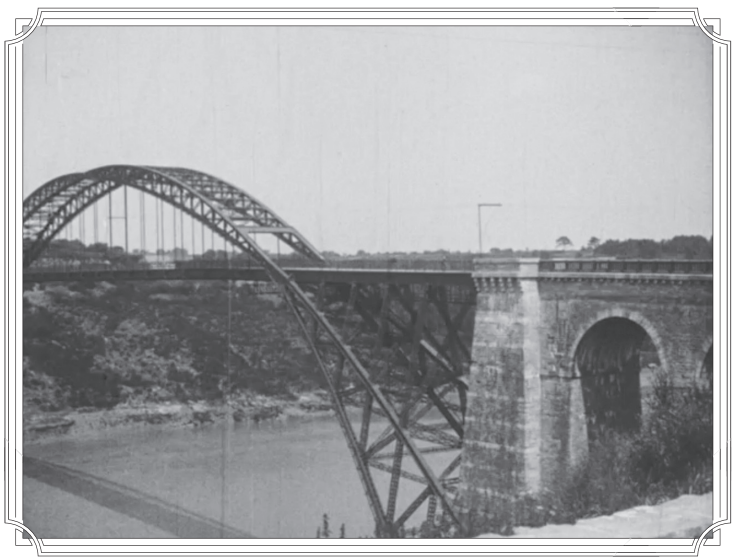
'For still, in 1923 it stands not so very far from where it stood in that "giant age before the flood" of nine years since.'

Aldous Huxley, *Vanity Fair*, 1923

1. LOOKING

'If you look at it from very close up . . . you can see all those bridges, hinges, gears, and bolts, and refrains, and all the minor instruments that link distinct, singular and unique events. It is these that form the underpinnings of the world . . . these that launch the phantom trains of thought between things that are naturally strangers.'

Olga Tokarczuk, *The Books of Jacob,*
Fitzcarraldo Editions, London, 2021



After a long and unusually cold June, summer has finally arrived. Now, on the last day of the month, the sun stands high in a milky white sky right overhead the bridge. It casts a strong dark stripe of shadow across the surface of the languid river flowing unhurriedly towards the Atlantic. The bridge's arch, a mighty half-moon of iron, is bisected by the road it carries high above the placid waters of the Vilaine. If you know where to look, you can just about pick out a rider on the bridge. He is nothing more than a tiny dot of white passing rapidly through a picture. You can hardly see him, before he's gone.

FRANCE, AND ITS ABSENCE

This is the story of an obsession. Actually, and more specifically, it's the story of an obsession within a pandemic after which there is a war. These details matter, I think.

It all began in the late summer of 2020, the first year of Covid. I had just returned from spending the best part of a month away from home commentating for British TV on the Tour de France. The 2020 Tour had been an exceptionally dramatic edition of the race, one which had held us in suspense right to the very end when the young Slovene, Tadej Pogačar, turned it on its head, snatching victory in the most ruthless and unforeseeable fashion. His exhilarating win in the final time trial had been orchestrated on the steep slopes of La Planche des Belles Filles, a hilltop I knew well.

This famous wooded climb runs up the side of a hill in the historically disputed Vosges mountains. These humpbacked peaks run along the linguistic and political fault line of western Europe's great schism between France and Germany. The grey villages and mist-shrouded hills of the Vosges, forever caught in a cultural no man's land, had always drawn me in. Their proximity to the German border is what defines them: across that line everything changes so entirely it's like entering a different world. Over many years I had spent long periods of time in both countries, and so the Vosges felt personal to me.

I also knew this particular climb better than almost any other. Over the last decade, the Tour has often battled along the winding road to the top, ribboning up towards a famously steep ramp just before the finish line. Bradley Wiggins took his first yellow jersey on 'La

Planche'. Once, when the race went there, I stayed the night before in an elegant manor house a dozen kilometres from the hill. On my way to work the following day I called into Corbusier's Notre-Dame du Haut chapel.

I sat for a long time on a wooden pew, looking at the tiny block of thickly cut stained glass set deeply into the church's massive, whitewashed walls. Outside, the Vosges mountains were coming to life with summery birdsong. Later that day, as the race approached the final climb, the TV helicopter dwelt for a few seconds over the Notre-Dame, and I was able briefly to recount on air my morning's visit there, before the director cut back to the race beneath. Weaving culture and live action together is the wonderful responsibility of a cycling commentator. No other sporting event balances the world in one hand and the race in another like the Tour de France.

But in the delayed Tour of 2020, our entire production team was forced by Covid travel restrictions to stay in the UK and broadcast remotely. That meant, for the first time in 18 summers, I would not be rolling through France, *département* by *département*, feeling the tilting topography, the changing climate, the differing light. I would not be able to move like a dot on a giant canvas and would be denied that sense of awe to which annually I succumb at discovering new wonders and revisiting old touchstone towns.

Brittany, for example, had always been part of my ritual summers in France. Throughout the long, uncomplicated years when our children were young, we would visit its rocky shores, its hydrangeas, wind-eroded churches and grey cottages straight after the Tour. Creatures of habit, we were drawn back to a certain little village; a sacred-seeming patch of green amid ancient stones. Every year, on a campsite watched over by drifting, thickening white August clouds and fringed by ferns and brambles, I would softly let go the din of the Tour. Here I would unconsciously collect my thoughts and begin to mould them into some sort of shape; the serried impressions of another July spent in France. What I could not have known in the locked-down reality of 2020 was that the mysterious landscape of Brittany was about to come back to me in a most unexpected, entirely different manner.

But before all of that, I had an accident. That pandemic summer I commuted to work at a TV studio in Kent every day by bike. On the

final evening of the Tour, after we'd finished off all our commentary duties, I rode back to my hotel room from the studios for the last time. Because the race in Paris had finished late, and because the whole Tour had been delayed until September, I hadn't been prepared for the fact that it would by now be pitch dark as I made my way home. The little bike lights I had with me were wholly inadequate, flashing dimly, instead of illuminating the way. But they were all I had.

It was not surprising that I crashed. Not able to see where I was going, I simply rode headlong into a very deep ditch, where I landed on the damp, stony ground with an outstretched arm and a horrible jolt, knowing straight away I had broken my arm. But I would only gradually realise over the course of the next few hours, days and weeks, quite how badly I had fractured it. I waited nine long days before having a three-hour operation to screw together my shoulder, after which I began slowly to understand how long my recovery might take.

With my woozy re-emergence from a London hospital post-surgery, there began a period of my life which layered confinement upon rehabilitation, upon self-isolation. I discharged the final few administrative tasks in my working life, but otherwise spent my waking hours brooding, looking at the days getting shorter, and the incidences and deaths from Covid-19 accruing even more threateningly as we headed into our first autumn, then winter, within the strictures of a pandemic. Sitting at my desk, my right arm in a sling, and only able to type slowly with my left index finger, I felt as if the open endless world I thought I knew, already viciously compromised by the virus, was shutting down for good.

It was around then that I got a text message about a reel of film. It came from an ex-paratrooper called John.

THE REVELATION OF JOHN MCDONALD

I should explain how fragile this connection was, how strange and fortunate; and how coincidence and chance have played their spidery part in a web that started to be spun that very moment.

John McDonald is something of a Renaissance man. He's made radio documentaries about boxers, he's been a photographer, a scriptwriter and

a soldier, in roughly reverse order. These days his principal occupation is as the Master of Ceremonies for the Professional Darts Corporation. If you've ever watched the darts on TV, you will know him. He's that silver-haired, well-turned-out chap with outstanding teeth and an even better voice whose job it is to call the darts players to the oche for a televised match.

For an irrepressibly verbose man, John's text communication was sparing, to the point of being cryptic. The message he sent me that September morning was simply a link to something he'd spotted online. I wondered briefly whether it was spam, as there were no accompanying words, just the link. In fact, I very nearly didn't open it, for fear it would unleash another unwanted virus into my life. And besides, how many links do we click on every day of our lives? How many of those actually lead somewhere significant? Not many.

That's how the story of the film began, on the most humdrum of terms. But even that probably isn't really the starting point. Tracing back the origins of any sequence of events is a limitless process.

As it is written in the final book of the Bible, in which the end of the world is revealed to another John, the Apostle, *Happy is the man who reads, and happy those who listen to the words* . . . (Revelation 1:3).

JOHN, LANCE AND THE TOUR DE FRANCE

In the late noughties, John and I used to go running along the canal in Wolverhampton when we were both working on a televised darts tournament. Most mornings I would stand there in the half-light of a November dawn in a pair of shorts and some muddy training shoes. I would wait for him by a canal lock, its iron-clad black wooden beam glistening in the morning damp. Then I'd spot him coming towards me through the chill air, breaking into a shuffling jog, upright, a little portly, and wearing a rustling cagoule.

'There he is, all present and correct!' John shouted in that familiar cheerful manner, addressing me from a distance in the third person. 'Well, present, anyway. Let's leave it at that.'

'Morning John,' I replied, and we ran off together.

The canal path was too narrow to accommodate us side by side, so John jogged ahead and I followed behind, stepping carefully either side of the sad little puddles that had collected in the middle of the path. It

was better with John in the lead. He was ex-military and leading was a natural state for him. I watched his steps, noting where he placed his feet to avoid the mud. There were twenty-two locks on this stretch of the canal, all the way from the city centre, past the racecourse on the left, dropping under a series of beautiful brick-built bridges to the junction with the Birmingham canal. That's the exact point we'd just reached when John suddenly started, quite unexpectedly, to talk about the Tour de France.

'I just think it's amazing,' he said, lithely dodging another puddle. 'I mean those distances, every day. And those massive mountains.'

John, perhaps innocently, had stumbled upon my favourite subject. 'They used to ride twice as far back in the day, John,' I told him. 'Over 400 kilometres per stage.'

John shook his head in disbelief, as people often do when they hear that for the first time. 'They've got to be the greatest athletes alive, Ned.'

'In some ways,' I suggested, shouting at his back as we ran on. 'But not in every way.'

Even though this conversation happened a long time ago, I had already amassed years of experience at the race. The first three Tours I had covered, from 2003 until 2005, had featured Lance Armstrong at the very height of his powers. Memories drifted back to me as we ran on. The water was lifeless and black. Crows hopped around on bare branches of the trees overlooking the canal, and in the distance yellowish coal smoke rose from the chimney of a houseboat into the still, damp air.

'Take Armstrong, for example,' said John. 'What an absolutely incredible guy. I mean, what a hero. There's just nothing to compare with what he's done. What's he like to meet in person, Ned?'

'Oh, pretty interesting,' I replied. 'Pretty charismatic.' I remembered the dozens of times when I had stood face to face with Armstrong, my words dancing on the head of a difficult question, as he fixed me with his blue-eyed stare. 'Can't trust a word he says, mind.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that he doped,' I said lightly, not thinking I was saying anything particularly revelatory. 'We all know he doped all throughout his career.'

'You can't be serious?' John stopped running. 'Armstrong?'

After a short pause, we set off again, but more slowly now. All the way along the canal, to the turning point of the run, and all the way back up the twenty-two locks to our hotel in the city, I furnished John with the details of what I knew, or what I suspected about Armstrong. For a man who liked to talk, I had never known John so quiet. Ever since that day, whenever John and I have met, he has remembered the conversation, almost word for word. 'You remember that morning run, Ned? Down the canal. Lance Armstrong, the biggest cheat there's ever been.'

Time passed. Armstrong came back to race the Tour again, then confessed it all to Oprah Winfrey, a moment I witnessed all alone in a hotel room in Leeds. And all the while my life became more inextricably interwoven with the Tour de France.

By the time the autumn of 2020 came around, I had worked on a total of 18 consecutive editions of the race. It had taken up residence at the centre of my life.

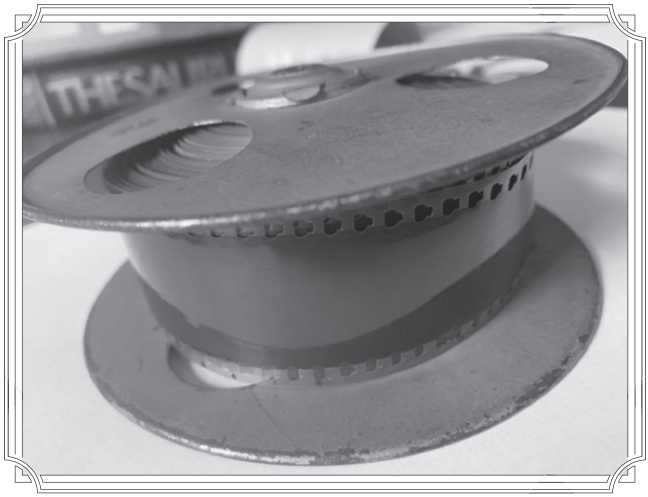
AN AUCTION, A BID AND A JIFFY BAG

A refuse lorry thundered portentously down the road outside, making the windows rattle. So little traffic passed the house during that period of lockdown, that its sudden roar jolted me out of my sullen reverie. I had not left the house, except to dart out to the shops, masked and avoiding any kind of contact, for weeks. My bike stood propped up in the shed, unridden. My arm was broken and my mood was low, every day.

I looked at my phone and John's message. After a momentary pause, I duly opened the link that he had sent me. A page from an online auction house popped up. I squinted at the text that appeared below a small thumbnail image:

> *'Lot 212. A Rare Film Reel from the Tour de France in the 1930s? Condition unknown.'*

From the picture of the reel, it was impossible to know exactly what I was looking at. The metal casing in which the film sat looked a bit battered, and the dark brown film, coiled around its spindle, was impenetrable. It was hard to ascertain from the single photo of the lot what it might actually contain.



Lot 212 was in a category all of its own on the website; an anomalous, overlooked item surrounded by the more mainstream sporting orthodoxy of signed football jerseys, cricket bats and rugby memorabilia, which were clearly attracting the majority of interest in the online auction. Though the date of the sale was some time away, I placed a bid of a maximum £140, feeling both foolish and excited at the same time. I had never even attempted to buy anything at auction before and I wasn't particularly confident I'd win it, having no idea whether my bid was a reasonable one. How do you set a price on such an obscure item? I submitted my bid and then promptly forgot all about it.

A few weeks later, the day of the sale came around. As I had suspected and hoped, Lot 212 had generated very little interest. Though some anonymous online stranger raised me from £100 to £110, a simple extra tenner on top of that bid secured the rather dubious prize. The lot was sold to me for just £120. Just like that. Suddenly thrilled by my achievement, I stood up from my desk and closed the lid of the laptop. Then I quickly re-opened it again to check that I hadn't got the wrong end of the stick, which it seemed I hadn't.

A week later, a Jiffy bag landed with a thump in the hallway and nestled up against the radiator pipe. It was only later in the day that I discovered it and took the package upstairs with me to my desk, trying not to break into a run, and closed the door behind me, wanting the moment to myself. My hands, I noticed to my surprise, were shaking just a little.

Inside the Jiffy bag, covered casually in a thin layer of bubble wrap, was Lot 212. I walked with it to the window. Very carefully, I unfurled the first half-dozen frames of the film; matchbox-sized images bordered on either side by sprocket holes.

I held them up to the light.

STILL LIFE

A tiny map revealed itself to me. An identical image appeared on each subsequent frame I unfurled. I loosened a dozen frames, then a dozen more. Before long I had dropped a couple of feet from the reel, and all along its fragile length the same map was repeated.

I peered at the miniature lettering. In the top left-hand corner, in capitals: 'BREST'. And diametrically opposite: 'LES SABLES D'OLONNE' with the number 412 alongside. In the centre-left of the frame, the words: '4eme ÉTAPE 412 Km'.



I spooled on, now winding the frames I had seen onto the cardboard tube from the middle of a toilet roll, functioning as a makeshift spindle. The film was dark and felt so brittle to the touch that I was worried it would split. The image of the map replicated itself dozens of times more before there was a sudden cut. The next shot was another caption,

again marked out with white lettering against a black background: 'Au contrôle de Lorient.' I rolled the film on.

Finally, I reached a startling black-and-white image. Houses, dark grey against a white-out sky. A string of bunting suspended across a street thronging with people. A man in the foreground, his back turned to the camera, wearing a cap and an elegant long coat. And in the middle of the frame, tiny figures, dozens of them, just about to mount bikes.

The brightly detailed little images were crisp and miniature. With an instant sense of wonder, I realised I might genuinely be looking at a distant and long-forgotten Tour de France.



Metres of film later, over the course of which the figures in the frames moved almost imperceptibly over a series of tiny fractions, I came to another caption. Then, still further, another scene change. Now the riders seemed to be coming towards the camera, racing up a dusty white road, with a wooded horizon behind them. Another longer caption. And suddenly a bridge: a huge structure, almost military in design with a long iron arch, spanning a deep river valley.

At the bridge, I stopped spooling. I estimated that I'd spun through about half of the duration of the film. Carefully, I wound it all back onto the original spindle, for fear that the whole reel would start messily to unravel. I placed it back into the packaging and considered my next move.

The Jiffy bag, sitting on my desk now, sat portentously amid the mess of opened utility bills, desiccated biros and half-empty batteries, detritus of twenty-first-century life. Already, if still unconsciously, I had a sense that my reel of film was precious in ways I could only dimly grasp. Again and again I glanced at it, thinking of those tantalising little glimpses my cursory examination of its contents had afforded me. More than anything else, I wanted to see the images move.

I sent John McDonald a message. 'It's absolutely beautiful, John. Thanks so much for flagging it up.'

'Pleasure,' he replied.

'It's made my year!' I followed up.

He didn't reply to that. He could have had not the faintest idea how much meaning I'd stuffed into that simple phrase, since even I didn't yet understand how true it would prove to be.

RESTORATION

A certain, profound sense of ownership settled over me every time I glanced at the reel of film. I was filled with wonder at its dark contents, and would often return, many times a day, to sneak another glimpse at the shards of images from another time. Had they been images of everyday life, just ordinary street scenes, perhaps they might have been of less interest to me. But there was nothing ordinary about them. They were from a distant Tour de France, and therefore they were connected by a direct yet invisible thread to my central obsession.

Over a period of years, the Tour de France had settled at the centre of my life. It had defined not just my professional career, but had shaped my years, giving them contours that nothing else could match. When I counted back through time, trying to bookmark phases of my life, I did so in reference to the Tour de France. The year 1989 – Laurent Fignon and Greg LeMond battling it out on the Champs-Elysées, the same year I was in Germany for the fall of the Berlin Wall. Then